

The Staircase That Goes Down

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Vocabulary

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 15 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about four minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

In the dry state of Rajasthan in northern India, rain falls for only a few weeks each year. For the rest of the year the land is hot and the rivers are thin. So long ago, people there built something clever. Instead of a well you lower a bucket into, they built a well you walk into.

These buildings are called stepwells. One of the grandest stands in the village of Abhaneri and is known as Chand Baori.

From the outside it looks like nothing much — a low wall in a dusty square. Then you reach the edge and look over, and the ground simply drops away beneath you. Chand Baori is about thirteen storeys deep. Three of its four sides are covered from top to bottom in narrow stone steps, roughly three and a half thousand of them, arranged in criss-crossing zigzags. From above the whole thing looks like a giant pattern folded into the earth.

The fourth side is different. There the builders put galleries and little pavilions, where people could sit in the shade.

The point of all those steps was the water level. In the weeks after the monsoon rains the water rose high, and villagers only had to walk down a few flights. As the dry months wore on the water sank lower and lower, and they climbed down further and further to reach it. The steps simply followed the water wherever it went.

There was a second reward for the climb. Deep at the bottom, out of the sun, the air is noticeably cooler than it is up in the square — a useful thing in a place where summer afternoons are fierce.

Chand Baori is around a thousand years old. Nobody draws drinking water from it now, but the staircase still goes down.

Cover the passage before you start.

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about Chand Baori and why it was built that way.

PART B 5 questions

1 What is Chand Baori, and in which village does it stand?

2 How deep is it, and roughly how many steps does it have?

3 What did the builders put on the fourth side instead of steps?

4 Why did the well need so many steps instead of just a few?

5 The passage says summer afternoons there are “fierce”. What does “fierce” mean in that sentence?

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 · A stepwell — a well you walk down into. It stands in the village of Abhaneri in Rajasthan, in northern India.
- ☐ 2 · About thirteen storeys deep, with roughly three and a half thousand steps.
- ☐ 3 · Galleries and little pavilions where people could sit in the shade.
- ☐ 4 · Because the water level kept changing. It was high after the rains and sank through the dry months, so there had to be steps all the way down to reach it whenever it was low.
- ☐ 5 · Extremely hot and harsh — strong enough to be hard to bear. It is not describing an animal or a temper.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

—

QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 5

DATE

THE STRATEGY Count the parts

Some passages are built out of numbers and pieces: four sides, three of them stepped, thirteen storeys, one village. Before you cover the page, count the parts on your fingers and fix the number in your head. A number acts like a shelf — if you remember there were four sides, you will notice when you have only recalled three.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

When you pack a bag for school, do you count the things inside it? How does knowing the number help you?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains recall, not reading speed. Let your child read the passage twice if they wish, then cover it completely before Part A begins — do not prompt, and do not let them look back. The vocabulary question asks what a word meant in the passage, so an answer in their own words is better than a dictionary definition.